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The idea of "Own Space" through "Vignettes" in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*

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Abstract

This paper delves into the theme of "Own Space" in Sandra Cisneros' novel, The House on Mango Street. It scrutinizes how the protagonist, Esperanza, navigates the complex concept of home and belonging in a Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago. Drawing from the theories of spatial belonging, patriarchal constraints, and feminist perspectives, the paper highlights Esperanza's quest to carve out her unique space within the constraints of her environment. The use of vignettes as a literary device is explored, demonstrating how they provide insights into Esperanza's evolving identity and the challenges she faces in defying gender roles and societal spatial practices. In addition, it underscores the importance of space production theory, highlighting the role of vignettes in immersing the reader in Esperanza's coming-of-age journey. Ultimately, it argues that Cisneros' narrative style and Esperanza's experiences reflect the broader context of the Chicana experience, making The House on Mango Street a significant contribution to the discussion of cultural identity, gender, and space.

Keywords: *patriarch, space, vignettes, gender, spatial, displacement*

Background

Sandra Cisneros, born on December 20, 1954, is an accomplished Mexican-American author renowned for her impactful literary works, most notably her first novel, *The House on Mango Street* (1983), and her subsequent compilation of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). Her writing explores various literary forms that delve into emerging subject positions, a creative approach she attributes to her upbringing in an environment of "cultural hybridity and economic inequality that endowed her with unique stories to tell" (Doyle 6). Cisneros has received numerous awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and in 2017, she was granted one of the 25 new Ford Foundation Art of Change fellowships, solidifying her status as a key figure in Chicano[1] literature.

[1] "Chicana" is a term that typically refers to a woman of Mexican descent or Mexican-American heritage living in the United States. It's a term that has been used to describe the cultural, social, and political identity of Mexican-American women. Chicanas often embrace and celebrate their Mexican heritage while also asserting their place in American society and advocating for their rights and identity within the context of the Chicano movement, which is a civil rights movement that emerged in the late 1960s to represent the interests and concerns of Mexican-Americans. The term "Chicano" is used to describe both men and women of Mexican-American descent who identify with this cultural and political movement.

Cisneros' early life furnished her with a wealth of experiences that would later serve as rich sources of inspiration for her writing. Growing up as the only daughter in a family of six brothers often left her feeling isolated. The constant movement of her family between Mexico and the United States instilled in her a perpetual sense of "straddling two countries . . . but not belonging to either culture" (Doyle 54). Her literary work delves into the intricate formation of Chicana identity, exploring the challenges of navigating between Mexican and Anglo-American cultures, addressing the misogynistic attitudes inherent in both of these cultures, and portraying the experience of poverty. With her incisive social commentary and compelling prose style, Cisneros has garnered recognition that extends far beyond Chicano and Latino communities. In fact, her novel *The House on Mango Street* has been translated and taught in classrooms across the United States as a quintessential "coming-of-age story" (Cruz 910).

Sandra Cisneros, the author of *The House on Mango Street*, has utilized her own life experiences and emotions of not belonging to shape the character of Esperanza and develop the storyline of the novel. Cisneros, much like her protagonist, Esperanza, is a Mexican-American who grew up in a Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago. However, there are distinctions between them, such as the fact that Cisneros was "the only daughter in a family of seven children," (Madsen 106) while Esperanza has two brothers and a sister. This unique family dynamic made Cisneros feel isolated during her formative years, which she believes contributed to her inclination to create stories.

During her pursuit of an MFA in creative writing at the Iowa Writers Workshop, Cisneros began to recognize her own sense of ethnic "otherness" and felt marginalized due to her identity as a person of color, a woman, and someone from a working-class background. She found the academic environment at the workshop discouraging and felt disconnected from her classmates, who had very different backgrounds. Despite her initial intimidation and anger, she channeled these emotions into her writing, using *The House on Mango Street* as a means of asserting her identity and claiming her space. In this process, she gave life to the character of Esperanza, who embodies her personal feelings of displacement.

Introduction

Community and a sense of belonging are integral aspects of what we define as a place that we consider home. Home, a space where our heritage and culture originate, represents an origin location from which we can potentially migrate. For some, home is a place where one resides permanently with individuals that they are related to in some way. For Chicana writers, navigating where this place exists is particularly complex. Often their dual identities converge within the borderlands between where they live in the present and where they themselves, or their family have immigrated from. This search for "home" is at the forefront of many Chicana texts. In *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, the protagonist is tied to the spaces in which their homes exist. Esperanza is more focused on escaping the location that her family has moved to. Esperanza strives to redefine her very space to meet her unique needs. The character attempts to define her home within the confines of her very sense of spatial belonging. Spatial belonging, drawing partially on the theories of the "lived spaced" concepts of Henri Lefebvre, conceives of a space in which one can attribute the feeling of belonging, and more specifically a lived sentiment of home (Ryan 1019). To her, this internal and external odyssey within her private kingdom or home space functions as a crucial step in her discovery of her identity. Esperanza's spatial belonging engineers a sentimental location within which they can choose to accept, redefine, or move beyond her home.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza laments her dislike of the house that she did not choose as a home. She describes it as a small crumbling place with one bedroom that they all reside in together. More importantly, the residence is owned by her family, and they "don't have to pay rent to anybody" (Cisneros 3). Throughout the novel, we observe her interactions with the community of residents on Mango Street. Esperanza navigates her relationships with these children as she matures into her own identity. Despite the

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repetition of her lack of affection for the house on Mango Street, it becomes part of her evolving identity. The house on Mango Street "is not the house we would thought we'd get," but it is the house in which she learned to embrace her culture and Chicana roots (Cisneros 3).

In the book, "the ability of the human spirit to renew itself against all odds" resonates with familiarity (Ganz 19). The desire for belonging, of a space to call one's own, is not unique to these stories, as it is ingrained within the experiences of many who have navigated the borderlands between familiar and unknown. In another novel by a Latino woman author *If It Weren't for the Honeysuckle*[2], Beatriz remarks, "The earth beneath my feet wants me here. The house wants me here. I gave up my soul for this house" to illustrate that in payment for this sacrifice, the house has provided her with agency in her outcome (Trambley 58). The house is a space of belonging, within which she can embrace a sense of control. On the contrary to this, Esperanza, within *The House on Mango Street*, searches for her agency and individuality outside the confines of the home she did not choose. However, by the end of the novel, much like Beatriz, Esperanza discovers that her home, the house on Mango Street, did in fact allow her the freedom to grow and define her identity. In the resolution of both *The House on Mango Street* and *If It Weren't for the Honeysuckle*, Esperanza and Beatriz are enabled by their spatial belonging, within their respective homes, to embrace their identities in order to more fully navigate their futures.

Quest for own space

In a world where white males have historically sought and, until recently, often succeeded in dominating the literary canon, Sandra Cisneros emerges as a unique and unconventional presence, primarily because of her non-white, non-male identity. Described as "nobody's mother and nobody's wife" in the biographical information of the Vintage International edition of *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros, much like her protagonist, Esperanza, has discovered alternative avenues for nurturing, predominantly as a writer, educator, and mentor. This paper attempts to prove that Cisneros' quest for her "own space" through "vignettes[3]" is prevalent in *The House on Mango Street*, by adopting the strategy of *bildungsroman* and critiquing notions of success in the masculine ideology of American society.

"I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am the one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (Cisneros 89). These short sentences uttered by Esperanza, the protagonist or the author's surrogate, give readers ample clues that this echoes a feministic voice. A teenage Chicana girl living in an impoverished neighbourhood with her parents and siblings is searching for her "own space." Before settling into their new house, her family moves frequently in search of a house of their own, and within their house, the narrator wants her own space. Her search for "her space" begins early in the narrative. "Cisneros' protagonist, who is in most ways a mirror image of the author herself, reveals that in English, her name means 'hope," (Cisneros 10). She also reveals that she wishes to "baptize [herself] under a new name, a name more like the real [her] the one nobody sees" (Cisneros 11) because she hates any associations with her family members or she loathes to inherit anything that erases her "ownness",

[2] *If It Weren't for the Honeysuckle* is a short story written by Latino Estella Portillo Trambley. The story revolves around a Chicana woman named Beatriz who transforms a run-down shack into a nurturing and empowering home for herself and other women. Beatriz's determination and sense of belonging to this space enable her to gain control over her life and offer solace and support to others who seek refuge there. The story explores themes of home, empowerment, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

[3] Sandra Cisneros' novel, *The House on Mango Street*, consists of forty-four interconnected vignettes of varying lengths, narrated by the protagonist, Esperanza, in the first-person present tense. In the 25th-anniversary publication's afterword, Cisneros explained the writing style she developed for the book. She experimented with creating a text that resembled poetry in its succinct and flexible form. She broke sentences into fragments to create pauses for the reader and removed quotation marks to simplify the typography for easy readability. Cisneros aimed for the text to be accessible to people like those she remembered from her youth, especially those who had little time for reading due to demanding work. She expressed a desire to make the book approachable for individuals who come home with tired feet, similar to her father's experience.

which is apparently mirrored by her confession "[i]t was [her] great-grandmother's name and now it is [hers].

Despite being a young girl living in a community where gender-related norms and regulations shape her existence, she is already on a quest for her personal space. The disparities in the roles of men and women in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* are vividly portrayed through the characters that populate its pages. Esperanza's imperative to carve out a unique space for herself will lead her away from the stifling grip of patriarchal restrictions that would otherwise condemn her to a fate of hopelessness, similar to the experiences of her neighbors on Mango Street.

The concept of societal spatial practices is employed to shed light on how Esperanza challenges traditional gender roles and confronts the limitations imposed by the prevailing patriarchal order in her community. Her efforts aim to forge a new, distinct space for herself in this complex social landscape. In fact, the space Esperanza is seeking, based on Lefebvre's theory, is one where she does not have to suffocate due to gender role constraints. According to Lefebvre's theory, "the production of space" is that every mode of social organization produces an environment that is a consequence of the social relations it possesses and that the relation changes according to the differences in social organization (Lefebvre qtd. in Gottdiener 132-133).

The women of Mango Street, hailing from a Mexican/Latina background and residing in a disadvantaged Chicago neighborhood, foster a social environment that imparts valuable life lessons to Esperanza. These lessons underscore the significance of carving out her own space. Sandra Cisneros employs vignettes as a literary device to portray life on Mango Street, illustrating the connection between the social sphere and Esperanza's relationships. These vignettes are concise snippets of Esperanza's experiences, collectively forming a rich narrative of her formative years within her Mango Street residence and the surrounding neighborhood, which significantly shapes her.

Through Esperanza's encounters on Mango Street, readers witness the adventurous journey of her self-discovery concerning the pervasive influence of her gender on every facet of her life. This realization rather empowers Esperanza to bravely confront societal gender norms. She leverages her body, as described by Lefebvre, to create a space where she transcends the socially and culturally constructed subordinate roles of daughter, wife, or mother. In this unique space, she enjoys the freedom to pursue her own desires, such as acquiring an education and pursuing a career as a writer. While Esperanza's environment in the novel is initially defined by these gender roles, she demonstrates unwavering self-determination to defy these constraints and forge a space uniquely her own. The incorporation of vignettes into Cisneros' novel serves to provide readers with a deeper insight into the environment in which Esperanza must carve out her own space all by herself. In an analysis by Hartley-Kroger, she delves into how each vignette offers a distinct perspective on life on Mango Street (276). Hartley-Kroger draws connections between the gender roles of the women in the neighborhood and the roles they reluctantly accept (280). Through these associations, she offers insights into the potential identities available to Esperanza. In a research study conducted by Kray and her colleagues, they elucidate the reasons behind the resistance to change in gender roles (98). This study demonstrates that whether one views gender as historically rooted or biological, deviating from conventional behavior is often deemed incorrect, thereby reinforcing the existing societal norms (Kray et al. 99).

In order to comprehend the challenges Esperanza faces in establishing her own personal space within the constraints of her circumstances, her encounter with patriarchal oppression is employed to illustrate the impact of male dominance on her life. Initially, it is essential to define the concept of "patriarchal constraint," which is elucidated in an article by Jonasdottir. This article elucidates what it signifies to exist within a patriarchal system characterized by male dominance. Jonasdottir discusses the evolution of feminist theory over time in conjunction with the enduring theory of patriarchy (160). Additionally, Jonasdottir's

article alludes to the reasons why women are not devoid of power but rather lack authority (168). This article serves as a valuable tool for grasping Esperanza's decision-making process in the novel concerning her navigation of the patriarchal environment in which she resides.

Esperanza's aspiration to carve out a space for herself remains unfulfilled as long as she remains ensnared within the confines of patriarchal constraints. Another article that aids in elucidating the impact of patriarchal constraints on Esperanza is authored by Duan. In her article, Duan delves into the awakening of Esperanza's self-awareness and her resistance against patriarchy through the lens of self-consciousness and patriarchy theories (Duan 263). Duan closely examines Esperanza's growing awareness of racial disparities and her affiliation with feminism. She also scrutinizes how the father figure in most of the vignettes serves as a direct oppressor of women and how women in the neighborhood are relegated to the role of men's accessories (Duan 264-265). Duan propounds a theory detailing how Esperanza can liberate herself from the yoke of patriarchal oppression. Thus, the incorporation of this article demonstrates how Esperanza breaks free from gender roles to construct a new and autonomous space for herself.

Notably, Cisneros' writing style can be seen as a continuation of Virginia Woolf's assertion that women writers require a space of their own to contribute to the canon of women's literature (Doyle 9). “[I]f a woman really wants to write fiction, she would better have money and a room of her own” (Santosh and Kaapke). And this demand sounds justifiable, as we all are aware that historically men have been better privileged than women. Unlike women, only men were provided with the necessary environment to thrive as writers, poets, and philosophers. Cisneros not only creates her own space but also develops Esperanza's space in the novel. In her work, Cisneros uses domestic space to reflect on how the community reinforces race, class, and gender hierarchies imposed by the Latino patriarch on Mango Street (Doyle 5). Doyle explains that Cisneros' perspective, as a Chicana writer, offers a different viewpoint compared to a white perspective (6). However, Doyle’s argument does Nonetheless, Doyle's argument does not specifically address the social production of space.

Vignettes—a literary device

Cisneros uses vignettes in the novel to provide insights into the environment in which Esperanza must learn to create her own space. In an article by Hartley-Kroger, each vignette is examined to offer different perspectives on life in Mango Street, with a particular focus on how gender roles in the neighborhood influence the positions women accept (280). These connections help answer what kind of identities are possible for Esperanza.

In a study by Kray et al., the resistance to changing gender roles is explored, with atypical behavior being viewed as wrong, thereby reinforcing the status quo (Kray et al. 99). An article by Burcar is also used to examine how gender roles are portrayed through attire, specifically high-heeled shoes, drawing a parallel between the restriction of feet and the restriction of women's mobility in society (Burcar 354). Furthermore, women are forced to look beautiful by wearing attractive dresses, high-heeled shoes, walking gracefully, etc. to serve as a source of pleasure for men, equating “female beauty” with “bondage.” In the name of beauty, women are enslaved and treated as beautiful objects to be purchased or rated. Several Chicana authors have been depicting Mexican women as passive consumers in the neocolonial marketplace, but Maria Cristina Mena illustrates “how beauty products and services can be appropriated as limited yet potent acts of resistance” (Schuller 82). In one of her short stories “The Gold Vanity Set,” Petra, a young native woman ascribes her business success to her beauty. Her father-in-law asks her to stand at the door of his restaurant, “wooing customers in her capacity as the establishment’s waitress and advertisement” (88). She is also portrayed as a submissive, abused Indian woman, yet she artfully dresses her hair in ways that parallel the fabric she weaves. Furthermore, her conscious attention to beauty and femineity is her strength and power. Mena underscores the importance of physical appearance and visual knowledge in power

dynamics that don't rely on colonial rule but still emphasize women's bodies. In the story, characters such as Miss Young and her companions not only take control of the tavern space as intrusive tourists from North America but also establish and manage a visual hierarchy of neocolonialism. Through their privileged gaze, they reduce the locals to mere souvenirs, reinforcing the unequal power relations in place. In the same way, in another story by Mena "Marriage by Miracle," "aesthetic reconstructions figure as the most extreme strategy of the Ramos Blancos family's struggle to manipulate appearance for their own social advantage. Mena's characters cling to outward looks as a reliable indicator of class and racial status" (94). Mena's work also highlights how the beauty industry has played a role in shaping ideas about race. It simultaneously reinforces the significance of Euro-American beauty standards while introducing new ways of expressing beauty, challenging the beliefs of nationalists like Gamio, who rely on fixed notions of beauty as a measure of racial worth in the United States.

The aforementioned discussions provide insight into the experiences expressed in the vignettes and help us understand Esperanza's choices throughout the novel. They shed light on how making her own space can be challenging in her circumstances, given the patriarchal constraints that impact her life. Two articles further explain how patriarchal constraints affect Esperanza. Jonasdottir's article defines what it means to live within a patriarchal system characterized by male dominance and examines the evolution of feminist theory alongside patriarchy (160). She also highlights that women may lack authority but are not powerless (168), helping us understand how Esperanza navigates her choices in a patriarchal environment.

Duan's article explores Esperanza's growing self-awareness and resistance to patriarchy, considering the theories of self-consciousness and patriarchy (Duan 263). It delves into how the male figures in the vignettes act as direct oppressors of women and how women in the neighborhood are often regarded as accessories to men (Duan 264-265). Duan presents a theory of how Esperanza can break free from patriarchal oppression, thus showing how Esperanza defies gender roles to create a new space for herself.
To me, one limitation of this essay is the absence of a discussion on language. The language used by Esperanza and those in her neighborhood is described as direct and selectively tagged, as defined by Genette (Barry 238). While speech representation throughout the novel may offer a closer connection to the events, the emphasis in this essay is on how and why Esperanza defies gender roles and societal spatial practices to create her own space.

Throughout her narrative, Esperanza employs her physical self as a means of expressing her evolving identity. This is evident in the vignettes titled "Hips" and "Sire," where Esperanza grapples with her changing body and its role in her society. In "Hips," Esperanza's growing body signifies her transition into adulthood as she gains this new physical feature. There's a mutual recognition among her friends that hips are both natural and significant in defining womanhood (Cisneros 50). In "Sire," Esperanza realizes that her newfound hips attract the attention of the neighborhood boys, leading her to believe that she has agency over how she uses her body. Cisneros beautifully captures Esperanza's sentiments when she writes, "Everything is holding its breath inside me. Everything is waiting to explode like Christmas. I want to be all new and shiny. I want to venture out into the night, with a boy by my side and the wind beneath my skirt. Not like this, spending every evening conversing with the trees, leaning out of my window, imagining what I can't see" (73). Esperanza is undergoing valuable life experiences that will guide her toward achieving her goal of establishing a unique space for herself. According to Lefebvre, she will need to integrate her mental, physical, and social aspects to create this space.

Cisneros' utilization of vignettes plays a pivotal role in exploring Esperanza's quest for autonomy and her own space. These vignettes also interconnect with Lefebvre's three aspects of space production theory. Sandra Cisneros' use of vignettes provides insights into Esperanza's motivations for seeking her own space. The manner in which Esperanza's life is narrated through this collection of short stories is a creative way to

immerse the reader in her coming-of-age journey. The primary narrative mode is diegesis, with Esperanza serving as the narrator. Esperanza discusses the events on Mango Street in a fundamental and cohesive manner (Barry 232). Cisneros states, "I wanted to write a collection which could be read at any random points without..."

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